

ARTS EDUCATION

Big Sky Arts Education

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The Comeback Kids

Have you seen this headline?

“Arts education poised for comeback in nation’s largest school districts”

Not all that many articles about arts education get posted on mainstream media websites, so when one does, especially one that heralds good news about arts education, it gets re-blogged and tweeted all over by arts education advocates. I saw it at least a dozen times in my Twitter feed over the past month.

But why should we care here in Montana? None of the nation’s largest school districts are in Montana; in fact, the Chicago Public Schools have over twice as many students as the *entire state* of Montana. We still have 61 one-room schoolhouses! Half of our public schools have less than 100 students.

This headline is not about us. Chicago, New York, Los Angeles, San Diego ... lucky them.

But play along with me for a minute. What if that headline said “Arts education poised for comeback in *Montana’s* School Districts?” Here are some things you might read about in that article:

- Montana is beginning the process of revising our arts standards. Teachers across the state are participating in focus groups and surveys, and eagerly volunteering to serve on the standards writing team.

- Eighteen teachers are heading to Salish Kootenai College in June for the first-ever Montana Teacher Leaders in the Arts Summer Institute, a partnership between the Montana Arts Council and the Office of Public Instruction. The teachers will receive in-depth professional learning opportunities with master arts educators on multiple arts learning topics. These teacher leaders will become coaches, mentors and advocates for

other teachers in their regions to implement best practices in arts learning.

- Great Falls Public Schools and the Great Falls Symphony were just honored as one of only 38 school/music organization partnerships in the nation to attend the Yale Symposium on Music in Schools.

- Missoula is the first Montana community to participate in the Kennedy Center’s Any Given Child Initiative to provide equitable access to the arts for every child in the district grades K-8.

- Lame Deer Middle School was one of eight pilot schools in the high-profile President’s Council on the Arts and Humanities Turnaround Arts program. Their students performed at the White House, and the school continues to receive visits from Yo-Yo Ma’s Silk Road Ensemble.

- Forty professional artists from across the state gathered at the Holter Museum in Helena in April for a weekend of networking and learning how to provide the highest-quality arts learning experiences for schools and communities.

All of the above is true. Maybe you could add something happening in your school or district to this list.

For years now, arts education nationwide has existed largely on the margins, pushed aside in favor of “important” learning that would lead to higher test scores. Too often there has been more bad news than good.

Montana’s teachers will slowly chip away at the obstacles, and give all Montana students what they deserve – a world-class education with arts learning at the core. You are the comeback kids!

Evidence suggests that arts education is moving back towards the center, not just in large urban districts, but here in Montana as well. Lots of good things are happening.

True, we still don’t have enough arts specialists, and we still don’t have enough funding available to support comprehensive arts curriculum, especially in our rural schools. But the winds are shifting.

One reason for the shift is evidence. A comprehensive national effort has been underway for years now to measure the impact of arts learning. The research keeps getting better, especially now that it is shifting away from often-faulty correlations between the arts and academic achievement and towards the arts impact on cognitive function.

Policy makers are beginning to acknowledge that the arts are one of the best interventions for students in low-performing, high-poverty schools.

But I believe we really need to give credit to teachers. The ones who give countless hours of after-school time for the school play, the strings program or to keep the art room open for students, knowing they will not be compensated for their extra time. The ones with

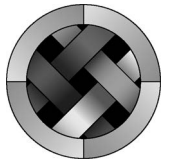
budgets stripped away to almost nothing, who still find a way to keep the program going with recycled materials and donations.

The ones who quietly close their classroom door and do that art project when the administration tells them they should be doing

extra test prep. The ones who find a way to pay for the museum field trip, even if some of the money comes from their own pockets. The ones who never let the arts be eliminated from their school, because they all have witnessed the way the arts can change a child’s experience of school from failure to success, from frustration to joy.

These teachers have kept the arts alive during dark days. These are the teachers I’ve encountered in Montana’s schools.

Montana’s teachers will slowly chip away at the obstacles, and give all Montana students what they deserve – a world-class education with arts learning at the core. You are the comeback kids!



7

Arts Education Partnership releases five-year strategy

The Arts Education Partnership (AEP) just released The Arts Leading the Way to Student Success: A 2020 Action Agenda for Advancing the Arts in Education. The strategic plan is a collaboration of 25 partner organizations invested in arts learning for all students.

This agenda will serve as the blueprint for the collective work of the partnership for the next five years, moving it toward the goal that, by the year 2020, every young person in America, at every grade level, will have equitable access to high quality arts learning opportunities, both during the school day and out-of-school time.

Access the agenda here: www.aep-arts.org/wp-content/uploads/AEP-Action-Agenda-Web-version.pdf.

Townsend students benefit from new sound system

It’s a new day for actors and musicians on the stage at Broadwater High School in Townsend thanks to a new sound system that debuted in March 2014 at this school of 670 students.

Designed and installed by Sunshine Productions of Great Falls, the system uses many remote microphones to enhance voices of individual performers. It also has strategically placed microphones above and below the stage. Several additional lights were installed above the stage that can be brightened or dimmed for mood effect.

The stage, located at one end of the gymnasium, has always been an acoustic challenge, says grade school music teacher Carla Amundson, noting that background music readily drowns out third-grade voices. High school drama club instructor Julie Diehl said it has always been a hurdle to help her students be heard in their plays.

The entire system is controlled off stage through a computerized console. Jennifer Lane, volunteer assistant in the drama department, said plans are to train two or three adults from the community to run the elaborate set-up for school plays and recitals as well as for funerals and other community events. Two high school seniors will be trained as well.

Lane headed the two-year project to obtain the new sound system. She was trained to operate it by Sunshine Productions owner Bruce Bull.

“We designed the system around the needs of that specific space so it was high-design



Drama Club volunteer Jen Lane, assistant James Maddox and Drama Club teacher Julie Diehl try out the new sound system.
(Photos by Hugh van Swearingen)

criteria which maximized the sound,” he said. The system is housed in a moveable case.

The \$12,000 project was paid for by a \$2,000 anonymous donation and a \$10,000 grant from the Fun For Life program, a private, nonprofit Broadwater County foundation. Fun For Life began with a \$1,300 donation from individuals as a memorial to Ryland KM Foote, a fifth grader who drowned in 1995.

With ongoing donations from friends and community members, the 18-year-old program has continued to flourish. It has funded many scholarships for Townsend elementary students to attend arts-related programs,

such as Grandstreet Theatre classes in Helena and the Montana Music Institute in Billings.

The program has also helped fund Shakespeare in the Schools and Missoula Children’s Theater at Townsend elementary school. Additionally, Fun For Life pays for students to take lessons in cello, guitar, piano, violin voice and drums.

For nine years, the Fun For Life board of trustees and advisory board operated the taco stand to raise funds at the Broadwater County Rodeo and Fair. More recently the program has been funded by an annual student talent show.

For more information, call Nancy Marks at 406-266-3710.



Drama Club productions benefit from the new sound system at Broadwater High School.